IS THE SUN DANCE DYING OUT?

Is the Ute Indian Sun dance dying out?

This year not more than 22 braves took part. When that religious ceremony was introduced at Whiterocks by the Sioux Indians years ago, perhaps 80 famous Utes danced to and fro round that pole. Then it was not uncommon for the ceremony to last upwards of a week and by the time the last tom tom sounded and the last echo of the eagle feather whistle died away, there were but few who had not fallen by the way side and had to be carried out. This time the dance lasted only three days and at the end all the 22 were there dancing. They were not supposed to eat, drink or sleep. But it may be that a least one or more did not live strictly up to the rule.

If nothing else would kill this dance, the commercialization of it sooner or later would. Years ago it was almost impossible for a white man to enter that arena. Then all at once every white who wanted to go in went in if he paid the fee, at first a dime, next two bits and lately half a dollar. And the Indians are no more to blame than the whites. In fact it was more than likely they learned it from the whites.

Usually while the Indians are dancing they pray to the Great Father to cure some disease. One year it is one thing and another year something else—tuberculosis, trachoma, cancer, goiter. This year it was rheumatism. Anson Manning had it bad all winter and spring. He danced and prayed and others prayed for him and the medicine man made medicine over him. He started to make the medicine on Manning's breast, but Manning said no, the rheumatism was in his legs and there was where the medicine was made. Others who danced were Bishop Atwine, Jim Redcap, Eli Sappanese, Shoshone Bob.

The Bannocks were there from Idaho and the Utes gave them many beautiful, gaudy and valuable presents, including shawls, belts, hatbands, calico for dresses and beads and things. Shoshone Bob was the distributor.

A great deal has been said and written about the barbarity of the Indian dances. The time was when Indians doubtless punished themselves, but not lately. All we have ever been able to discover was that it is a religious dance of endurance. Some people call it barbarous, ridiculous, silly and emotional. We have seen all that and then some at white camp meetings in the south. We have heard of it within the last week in a great political convention, where men fought and cursed on the floor of the auditorium. Barbarous? Who ever heard of anything so awful as the Herrin massacre? Why, the Meeker and Custer massacres were tame affairs in comparison. Yet savage Indians committed the latter while cultured whites committeed the other.

Speaking about Indian dances, Frederic J. Haskin recently wrote the following article which will be of interest at this time.

Indian ceremonials are rarely understood by other races, and consequently the Indian rites and dances have often been unjustly criticised, says J. N. B. Hewitt of the Smithsonian Institution.

The white man is extremely gullible when it comes to believing fantastic tales about the red man. It is no rare occurrence for a witness to appear at a congressional hearing and to testify regarding the evils of Indian dances and later to admit that he has never seen the objectionable rites.

Furthermore, the white man must plead guilty to a lack of sympathetic imagination when he observes the Indian. Aside from some ethnologists, people who do attend Indian ceremonies generally see only the gyrations of painted savages. Sometimes they cannot refrain from showing their amusement and scorn. Sometimes they offend the Indians seriously.

One man who was present at a Navajo snake dance grew righteously indignant at the signht of venomous snakes handled by the danc-

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ers, who even placed them in their mouths. When one of the reptiles was laid on the ground the visitor impulsively took a soda pop bottle and tried to kill it. The white man was the Indians' guest, but the snake represented some religious symbol to the dancers; and it was, for the time being, an object of veneration. Guest as he was, the rash outsider jeopardized his life.

Mr. Hewitt says that the ceremonies of the Indian are incorrectly called pagan. No people have held a more reverent attitude toward nature and the Master of Life than the Indians, he says. By their symbolism they built up a system of associations, so that when the saw the full moon on the budding trees, the ripe corn or the forest animals they thought of the legends and the significance of those things in life. Considering their "lack of advantages," the Indians put into words an astonishing amount of truth regarding their universe.

The Planting Ceremony.

The Indian regards the tribal rites and all the symbolism that goes with them with the same reverent respect that any other race feels toward its religious observances. A typical feast is the Iroquois planting ceremony, which takes place in the spring. The women and girls dramatize the planting processes and sing the songs descriptive of each. Men of the tribe preach and tell the others to treat one another kindly, to avoid lying and gossip, to live peaceably, and to be thankful for their blessings. There is always a feast and dancing at the close of all festivals. They believe that the Master of Life, seeing that the people dance, knows that His children are content with what He has done for them, and so He is pleased. It is all the Indian's way of rendering thanksgiving.

Outsiders, not knowing the language and symbolism, are apt to conclude that the Indians are holding a gay party, while as Mr. Hewitt points out, if we compare the occasion to something in our own civilization, it is more accurate to compare it to a religious meeting.

Use of hideous masks by certain tribes is a typical source of misunderstanding among white people. The masks do not represent the Indian's idea of beauty, as many people believe, but represent the seven winds which bring diseases. Each type of mask suggests the face of the victim of the disease brought by that wind.

On New Year's day masked men go into each wigwam and put out the fire, clean away the ashes, and light ceremonially a new fire. This is not a senseless rite. The ashes of the old fire have collected waste materials and germs for some months, and cleaning the fireplace is a health measure. Having the clean-up campaign conducted by men wearing disease masks is very much in line with our own publicity methods designed to make ideas graphic and vital.

Mr. Hewitt explained this ceremony to an audience of women in a Canadian town close to a reservation. The ceremony had taken place there every year, but the audience had never realized what it was all about.

There is no doubt that some dances of primitive tribes have included practices which the white man regards as reprehensible. The Indians' practice of slashing themselves and one another with knives during the sun dance has been criticised. So has the reckless handling of snakes, both harmless and venomous, at the snake dance. Charges of immorality in connection with some rites also have been made.

As it is Explained.

The Indians themselves say that few, if any, dancers cut themselves now in the sun dance. The idea back of the cutting was to show courage. That the white man should object to their handling of the snakes is not so easy for the Indian to understand.

Sixteen officials of a Pueblo tribe recently denied the implication of immoral practices in their ceremonials by saying: "Our dances are drama, opera and poetry. The womanhood of our pueblo is as sacred to us as the symbolic dance we are trying to defend and preserve."

This statement was made in a petition that the ancestral dances might continue without interference from the government. Secretary Work of the interior department answered, in part:

"As for Indian dances as a whole, I do not disapprove of them, quite the contrary, and nothing is farther from the thoughts of those who are guardians of the Indians than to interfere with any dance that has a religious significance, or those given for pleasure and entertainment which are not degrading. It is commendable of the Indians to desire to cherish the customs and traditions of their forefathers, and much good may result from a proper, periodical observance of these customs by present and succeeding generations."

The Indian is said to be losing his racial identity, but many tribes still cling to the ancestral faith and ceremonies. The young Indians who attend schools and colleges—and many of them have white blood in their veins—do not take so keen an interest in the tribal rites as the older generation. They do not understand them. Moreover, as the Indians become farmers and stock raisers it is increasingly difficult for them to attend feasts. The sun dance, for instance, is reduced to a brief one or two-day ceremony, and the government usually prevails upon the Indians to hold it at a time when farming will be least affected.